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ABSTRACT

Students can learn the concepts of descriptive language, "group think," and how to overcome communication apprehension painlessly by using human interest stories with humerous elements. A public relations teacher uses two audio tapes and a true story about a former student in her classroom. Garrison Keillor's 12-minute story "Tomato Butt" (dealing with beating the heat by picking tomatoes) is used as a basis for class discussion of positive aspects of descriptive language. A second human interest story, an audiotaped lecture about an automobile trip to a cafeteria that no one actually wanted to go to, entitled "Trip to Abilene" by Jerry Harvey, is used to guide group discussion on students thinking and acting for themselves and not going along with the crowd. A third story involves an experience from the teacher's early career regarding a student overcoming his communication apprehension--not through the teacher's intervention but through the use of phenobarbital. Students love to laugh at the story, and quickly realize that if that student could overcome communication apprehension, they can too. (RS)

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USING HUMAN INTEREST STORIES TO DEMONSTRATE RELEVANT CONCEPTS IN THE PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASSROOM

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"A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance". Ecclesiastes 3:4

While there certainly may be a fair amount of weeping and mourning in the speech classroom, especially when the grades come out, we hope that there are the occasions to dance and laugh as well. The laughter is the subject of this paper, remembering that if students can laugh, they are more likely to listen to and remember a concept. I seize upon any opportunity to use a funny story from the news or my family to illustrate a point. However, there are three major human interest stories which facilitate learning built into my curriculum: Two audio tapes, "Tomato Butt" by Garrison Keillor, "The Abilene Paradox" by Dr. Jerry Harvey, and a true story about a former student trying to overcome communication apprehension. This paper will discuss the concept which the stories reinforce, describe the stories, student response to them, and the results of their use.

"TOMATO BUTT"

An audio tape "Tomato Butt" by Garrison Keillor, the host of the American Public Radio program "Prairie Home Companion", is a masterpiece of descriptive language which the students relate to with alacrity. We first talk about language early in the semester before the personal experience speech, which is an exercise in language and delivery. The students generate a list of distractions to the language by brainstorming; the list goes on the board, and after

agreeing that they want to avoid the distractions, they are receptive to ways to improve their skills with better language.

That's when we discuss positive aspects of descriptive language. The tool I teach them is attributed to Lynn Quitmann Troyka, and is called RENNS for reasons, examples, names, numbers, and senses. Once they understand that concept, I play the twelve minute tape, Tomato Butt, and ask them to listen for RENNS.

The human interest is so compelling that the students forget they are working as they listen, and get caught up in the telling. I enjoy watching their faces as they are drawn deeper and deeper into the story. They go from vaguely bored expressions, slouched in their chairs to leaning forward in rapt attention, to slow smiles, to knee slapping laughter.

The story/monologue, was recorded one August and deals with Keillor's childhood memories of coping with the heat and boredom of a long summer day by picking tomatoes. He describes the heat and his desire for an air conditioner, and the rationale for why so many of the other townspeople had air conditioners. His mother urges Keillor, his brother and sister to "make the best of it, life is what you make it" and forget the heat by picking tomatos. While picking, the boys start throwing green tomatos at trees, and one another. When the sister chides them, Keillor responds to an impulse to throw a large rotten tomato at her. Fortunately for him she

bends over to pick, and he carries through his plan masterfully. He describes the feel of the tomato on his hand, and the sound the tomato makes as it lands right on the mark ("a flat, splatty sound, like a fat man taking a belly flop").

Since I began using this story, several years ago, the descriptive language which the students demonstrate in their presentations has improved. I have done no empirical testing, but I hear comments from the adjunct instructors praising the language skills of my students, and asking me how I'm teaching language. I am always happy to share "Tomato Butt".

"ABILENE PARADOX"

A second human interest story in the repertoire is "The Abilene Paradox" by Dr. Jerry B. Harvey. There is a video tape entitled "Trip to Abilene" by the same author, but the audio tape of his lecture is far more pungent and hilarious. To illustrate how memorable this story is, while writing this paper, I had an unsolicited testimonial from a former student who dropped by to say hello. She mentioned that one of her professors in graduate school had never heard of the Abilene Paradox, so she filled him in on the concept. Her encounter with the professor was this month (March, 1994); she heard the tape in my class in the Fall of 1987. Let us never discount the power of laughter to help the students learn and remember.

The Abilene Paradox demonstrates "group think" in a

clearly understandable and memorable fashion. I use it in the group discussion unit to give the students courage to think and act for themselves, and to avoid going along with the crowd. In his strong Texas drawl, using Southern colloquialisms, Dr. Harvey tells the story of his wife, himself, and his mother and father-in-law taking a disastrous trip through a driving dust storm in an un-airconditioned '59 Buick without shock absorbers, to eat at the Abilene cafeteria, when in fact none of them wanted to go. The story itself is told in great detail, with earthy language and funny examples throughout. After the story, he proceeds to illustrate the group think concept with other stories he has encountered in his consulting practice. Each of them borders on hyperbole, but makes such an impression, that the students can repeat them verbatim days later.

Later, I ask the students to tell of an incident when they "went to Abilene", meaning participated in group think, in order to fit in. Be relating to their own experience, they remember how to avoid the Abilene Paradox, and this strengthens their group discussion assignment. Realizing how ludicrous the "go along to get along" concept is, they are more willing to disagree verbally and state why they believe as they do.

Dr. Harvey has also written an article called "Organizations as Phrog Farms" which is useful in organizational communication classes. It is a highly irreverent look at maintaining status in organizations; I

recommend it.

JOHN'S APPREHENSION

In order to help the students cope with communication apprehension, I use several anecdotes which are laughable. I tell about my own funny experiences and those of my former students, with new ones added each semester, but always using the story about John. Please understand that the stories are interwoven with lecture on ways to cope with apprehension.

John's story is a true one which occurred when I was a graduate teaching assistant at a large Southern university over twenty years ago. Being my first semester as a teacher, I was terribly eager that my students excel. My hopes were dashed when John stood to deliver his first speech. He was a second semester senior, taking the freshman level speech course; he had delayed taking it because he was so frightened to speak in front of an audience. But since he wanted to be a county extension agent, the class was required for graduation in his major. John was a white knuckle speaker, grasping the lectern with both hands until his knuckles literally turned white. He crouched slightly and fixed his gaze not on the audience, but on the only window in the room which was to his hard left. He spoke not in complete sentences, but in a series of grunts and fragments which I failed to weave into any thesis, or main points. After class I stopped John to tell him that I thought he needed some extra work, at which time I set a plan before him. We would work in my office to improve his delivery, organization,

language skills, evidence, development of main points - you name it, we worked on it for weeks. But to no avail; because his second speech was no better than the first, and the third speech showed no improvement either. I was beginning to believe that I would be the reason that John would never become a county extension agent. I couldn't pass him - he wasn't doing acceptable work in any sense of the word. The end of the semester rolled around as they inextricably do, and John rose to deliver his final speech. I was astonished to see that he grasped the lectern with only one hand, and the knuckles didn't turn white. He made eye contact with the audience, and spoke for the most part in complete sentences. He had a thesis statement and several recognizable main points supported with evidence. What a turn around! I'd never seen anything like it before or since. So I stopped John in the hallway after class to tell him how pleased I was about his progress. When he responded he crammed his hands down in his pockets, ducked his head, scuffed his shoes on the floor, and said: "Oh yes ma'am, I took two phenobarbital before I come to class, and I feel reeeeaaaal good".

The students love to laugh at John's experience, and quickly realize that if John could overcome the apprehension, they can too. I am quick to add that they don't need drugs to do it though; And if they start feeling like John they should visit with me. By seeing ourselves through others who have reacted strangely to speaking situations, we can put the apprehension in perspective.

Using these three human interest stories has been quite successful for me in the public speaking class. The students learn the concepts of descriptive language, group think, and overcoming communication apprehension in a painless manner; they remember them; and apply them. They seem pleased when "a time to laugh" occurs in the otherwise academically correct routine.

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